# THE PLAGUE OF STRENGTH

# BODYWEIGHT BLITZ

BY JAMIE LEWIS

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# Introduction

Bodyweight exercises have fallen way out of favor in the strength communities over the last 70 years, moving more and more to the fringes of the exercise fitness world until they became a segment of fitness unto themselves. Bodyweight experts are usually out to prove that their methods mean you don't need weights, which is all well and good until it completely alienates lifters due to the attitudes of the experts.

If you don't know what I mean, you need only to look at any of their social media, which takes a real hard line against lifting. It makes sense, as this split was begun by the people who invented both gymnastics and lifting culture, the Turners of Germany. Led by the inventor of modern gymnastics and progenitor of modern gym culture, Dr. Friedrich Jahn, the Turners first spread the gospel of gymnastics and "heavy gymnastics" (weightlifting), then turned their backs on the latter as an evil that caused "muscle binding".

That's where the schism in lifting began- kettlebells, dumbbells, and barbells set against the Roman rings, parallel and uneven bars, trapeze, and padded floor, with wrestling first caught in the middle and then discarded from the strength training world as if it was never a part (although wrestling was considered the best way to build strength, size, and musculature by a massive proportion of strength experts until about the 1940s).

Enter modern lifting media- what began as holistic physical culture magazines devolved into magazines promoting certain sports over others, which deepened the divides that already existed and opened new ones- strongman contests turned into general weightlifting contests that spit into Olympic weightlifting, powerlifting, and odd lifting, and odd lifting then split into strongman and (even odder) odd lifting, and then all of those fractured into a thousand varieties of tested and untested, equipped, a little equipped, and unequipped. Meanwhile, bodybuilding flared up as a massively popular sport, then was vilified by social conservatives all over the world, then came back as a beauty pageant that eventually fractured into a kaleidoscope of extremely tiny divisions of divisions of multiple related but allegedly distinct exhibitions of varying degrees of muscular development with and without drugs.

What resulted was a disaster, and we've gotten hyperfocused on such silly shit that we've lost the ability to see the forest for the trees.

The fact that you can't scratch your back doesn't mean you're jacked- it means you're crippled.

You shouldn't be out of breath sweeping up your driveway. You're not strong as an ox, because oxen can pull a cart down a muddy path at three miles an hour all day. Without wheezing.

If kneeling is a chore, or you can't sit in a catcher's squat/third world squat to pet a kitty, or jump up onto a bench, you're crippled. Your age doesn't matter. Nor does your past injuries- the reason they're still bothering you is because you've not done enough to fix them.

And fixing them means moving around in decidedly uncomfortable ways.

It’s time to get off the padding of the bench and drop our soft-as-baby shit asses onto the floor. It’s time to be uncomfortable, and to suck up looking like an asshole because we should be able to do a lot more dope stuff than most of us can with all of this goofy muscle we’ve built.

And hell, even if you’re already flexible and posses a great deal of muscular endurance, you still might find yourself in a place where hitting the gym isn’t an option, like on vacation, traveling, when you’re broke, or just when you’re too busy to go to a second location to get in a quick lift.

Whatever the reason you’re reading this, know this:

The Gold Standard for Bodyweight Exercise Excellence was set by bodybuilding proto-powerlifter Marvin Eder, who at 67 years of age could do 100 dips and 90 chinups in a row. At that point, he was training three times a week, doing five sets of chins for 50 reps, five sets of dips for 50 reps and 550 alternate jumping lunge squats, still at a bodyweight of 197 pounds.

# Warming Up

Those of you who have been reading my stuff for the last 15 years will be shocked that I'm including a warm up, as I've been steadfastly opposed to the dumbass warmups I see in the gym since I first entered it. Much of what you see in the gym, especially where it concerns warmups, is useless to a degree that it hardly bears mentioning- if you're not raising your heart rate and sweating a bit, it's really not a warmup.

Likewise, the treadmill is not a warmup, as it pulls your legs backward for you, which weakens your posterior chain and tightens your hip flexors. As this is already a problem for most of us due to the fact that we spend the bulk of our lives seated in a chair, exacerbating it with the least enthusiastic of all warmup activities is counterproductive. Furthermore, it's too goddamned gentle- we could all stand to jostle ourselves around a little more, because I've found that if you don't you literally end up locked in one position by your muscle fascia, which basically build a cocoon of tightness and knotting round your body to shore you up after injuries and illness.

You know how your weak side will be 75% as strong as your strong side? Well, I've discovered that occurs because your body locks down your strong side to limit it so as not to injure yourself  going way harder than your weak side can. This means that every single injury you have on one side of your body caused the opposite side to tighten. That doesn't tighten symmetrically though, as your body is pulled all out of whack from the injury, plus the limping and babying and limited motion you had. Thus, the injured side tightens even more after it heals to protect it and to match the strong side's new tightness.

And that cycle occurs over and over throughout your life, leading to weird pains that seem as nonsensical in nature as they seem impossible to fix. The worst of mine began in my shins and the outside of my knees along with my abs, so don't think any part of your body is immune to this.

Numb fingers? There's badass knots in your biceps, triceps, shoulders, and forearms. They start in your armpits (and probably the base of your skull, and radiate to the tips of your fingers. Your knuckles aren't arthritic- they're knotted up. Same with your hands and wrists.

Numb toes- see the above and apply it to your legs. If you straddle a hard foam roller and sit on it with all of your weight on your taint, you'll see that your knots start there and radiate to your toes.

That said, I am not a massage therapist and can only recommend you do incessant self-massage, especially between sets. I can also recommend you start doing a warmup when you hit the gym- not so much for lifting performance as much as for overall life quality and performance of daily tasks. Additionally, this warmup can start to undo some of the insane muscle shortening bullshit we've all inflicted on ourselves by heeding the fitness industry's advice to never lock out weights, and to do everything with soft elbows and knees. It turns out that shit will eventually prevent you from straightening your arms, and that directly leads to torn biceps and triceps… take it from a guy who's torn all that shit.

Personally, I walk about .75 miles and jog another .75 or so (running on the curb so that I work my balance, hip, and ankle flexibility) on my way to the gym, then do some arm swings, pullups, dips, and free squats for about ten minutes when I get to the gym.

Arm swings? Yeah- I just swing my arms all over the place, which eventually tightens itself into some arm circles. I dislocated my arm and shoulder a couple of years ago and just trained through it, and I tore the bicep and tricep on the other side, so my arms, shoulders, and pecs are TIGHT. I swing my arms violently away from and across my chest like I'm doing a crazy standing chest fly, taking a huge breath before doing a couple so that I fully expand my ribcage. All of my personal stretching is weird, but arm swings are a pretty normal part of warming up in every sports.

Trunk rotations with your arms and legs spread wide are also a great one- open up your chest as much as possible. You'll be amazed to find out how tight you are, and how much badass muscle is buried in your massive joints because it's stuck where it shouldn't be as a result of all of your heavy-ass lifting over short ranges of motion.

When I see shit like the Ge Indians of South America running log relays wherein participants would carry short logs weighing as much as 200 lbs over mountain jungle courses several hundred yards long, I get jealous as hell, because that's stuff I would have killed to do in wrestling in my 20s, and it's the type of stuff we should all be doing now… though I doubt many people reading this would make it through a full leg of that race. And if we can't, are we truly strong? While you ponder that, check out this warmup done by completely unrelated people on an entirely different American continent, because this Native American warmup is extremely similar to the manner in which the Ancient Greeks trained, and it gives you a better idea of the dynamic manner in which I like to warm up.

## A Important Note on Walking, Jogging, and Stretching

Walking is something that every single fit person in history has done outside of the modern era, which is weird given the obsession people have with yammering on about how many steps they take in a day. I'm not talking about your step tracker- I'm talking about outside of the bullshit housewives brag about, go for an actual walk outdoors. Preferably on an uneven surface- again, I walk and run on the curb to work on my feet, calves, and ankles, and my knees no longer hurt when I sit for long periods.

Regardless of whether or not you have any of this pain, it's a certainty if George Hackenschmidt needed to do it to be jacked and strong, so do you. And it wasn't just him- a lot of wrestlers of that era tended to walk holding light weights (2kg/5lb) to strengthen their hands, while one of the largest wrestlers of the era, gigantic Ali ben Abdu walked so much wrestling promoters relied on him to be their advertising. He was so large, so jacked, and so dark that he stood out in any European crowd, and was a walking billboard for his own wrestling matches as well as the value of walking every day, and they didn't diminish his strength in the way you'd think a full day of non-stop walking would (he never beat the strongest guys, but he beat everyone else). Other wrestlers of the day wore lead-lined shoes for 9-mile hill runs, like world champion weightlifter and Bashkiri wrestling champion Sergei

Eliseev, and still others swore by forest walks and runs. But none of them suggested cardio was optional, and those guys were the biggest strongest people the planet had ever seen prior to the advent of steroids, so fucking do cardio already.

Stretching is something that I've ignored out of a steadfast hatred of the faux-calm and endless posturing of the yoga crowd, in addition to the fact that I've never found a yoga instructor who's even halfway useful at explaining stretching to a musclebound cripple like myself. It's important, however, due to the fact that we've all been doing artificially short ranges of motion in our lifting because we follow modern rather than old recommendations on form, particularly in chest and shoulder exercises. So stretch, goddamn it all, and stretch shit you never considered stretching before.

If you want a more conventional warmup, here's one that also doubles nicely as a simple bodyweight workout as well.

# Zero-Equipment Beginner Bodyweight Workout

This one is dual purpose- **you can do this once through as a twenty-minute warmup** prior to hitting the weights, **or you can do it three times as an hour-long workout**.

Either way, I recommend a mile and a half to two miles (.75km-1km) walk and/or jog independent of that. In truth, you really only need to warm up for 20 minutes, but given that most of us have skipped stretching our entire lives, you might want to double up on your efforts and kill more than one bird with this stone. Should you only choose to do the bodyweight workout, however, you'll still be nicely warmed up and stretched for a hard workout.

Hold each stretch in this workout for 15 seconds.
4-count means 4 full reps are one rep. The way you see in the military.

**4-Count Jumping Jacks**- 25 reps
**4-Count Large Arm Circles (Front)**- 5 reps
**4-Count Large Arm Circles (Back)**- 5 reps
**Situps**- 20 reps
**Pushups**- 20 reps
**Torso Prone Stretch**- 2 each side
**Butterfly Stretch**- 2
**ITB Stretch**- 2 each side
**Hurdler's Stretch**- 2 each side
**4-Count Prone Flutter Kicks**- 5 reps
**Pushups**- 20 reps
**Situps**- 20 reps
**Supine Back Stretch**- 1
**4-Count Prone Superman**- 5
**Vee-Ups**- 30
**Donkey Kicks**- 20 each side
**Tricep Stretch**- 2 each side
**Upper Back/Shoulder/Tricep Stretch**- 2 each side
**Standing Iliopsoas Stretch**- 2 each side
**Standing Quad Stretch**- 2 each side
**Standing Calf Raises**- 30
**Calf Stretch**- 2 each side
**Dead Hang from Bar**- 30 seconds

- I realize a pullup bar is equipment, but you can do pullups pretty much anywhere. I know because I've done thousands and thousands of pullups while hanging off the side of a bunk or the stairs in jail. Use a tree branch, a fence rail, or go to a park if you have to. There's no scenario in which a place to do pullups is not handy.

# Zero- and Minimal-Equipment Intermediate/Advanced Bodyweight Workouts

Before you do this, you'll need to know your AMRAP number on every exercise. If the volume feels low, you can either move up in the percentages or add rounds. I wouldn't go over 50% of your AMRAP number though, as it kills your total work capacity. If you pace yourself you can do seriously ungodly volume. I've included five rounds, though you can get in a great workout with a warmup and two or three rounds (I'd recommend making the last one an AMRAP round regardless of how many you do).

Either make your first round the beginner workout or do a round of that before you start this to get limbered up.

| **Workout 1** | Round 1 | Round 2 | Round 3 | Round 4 | Round 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Free Squat** | 50% | 30% | 50% | 30% | AMRAP |
| **Dips** | 30% | 50% | 30% | 50% | AMRAP |
| **Chinups** | 50% | 30% | 50% | 30% | AMRAP |
| **Diamond Pushups** | 30% | 50% | 30% | 50% | AMRAP |
| **Hanging Leg Raises** | 50% | 50% | 50% | 50% | AMRAP |
| **4-Count Overhead Claps** | 10-20 | 10-20 | 10-20 | 10-20 | 10-20 |

| **Workout 2** | Round 1 | Round 2 | Round 3 | Round 4 | Round 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Wall Sits** | 90 seconds | 60 seconds | 90 seconds | 60 seconds | AMRAP |
| **Band Overhead Tricep Extensions** | AMRAP | AMRAP | AMRAP | AMRAP | AMRAP |
| **Hang From Bar** | 30-60 sec | 30-60 sec | 30-60 sec | 30-60 sec | 30-60 sec |
| **Pause Dips** | 50% | 30% | 50% | 30% | AMRAP |
| **Reverse Band Curls + Band Curls** | AMRAP | AMRAP | AMRAP | AMRAP | AMRAP |
| **Alternating Leg Plank** | 60 sec | 60 sec | 60 sec | 60 sec | 60 sec |
| **Arm Circles** | 10 4-count big, front and back (20 total) | 10 each small | 10 each big and small (40 total) | 10 each big and small (40 total) | 10 each big and small (40 total) |
| **Pullups** | 30% | 50% | 30% | 50% | AMRAP |

| Workout 3 | Round 1 | Round 2 | Round 3 | Round 4 | Round 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Alternating Lunges** | 50% | 30% | 50% | 30% | AMRAP |
| **High Knees** | 20 seconds | 30 seconds | 20 seconds | 30 seconds | AMRAP |
| **Walking Pushups** | 50% | 30% | 50% | 30% | AMRAP |
| **Step out Squats** | 30% | 50% | 30% | 50% | AMRAP |
| **Neutral Grip Pullups or Chinups** | 50% | 30% | 50% | 30% | AMRAP |
| **Hanging Leg Raises** | 30% | 50% | 30% | 50% | AMRAP |
| **4-Count Overhead Claps** | 10-20 | 10-20 | 10-20 | 10-20 | 10-20 |

# Maximizing Your Pullup/Dip Game

If there is any one exercise at which I truly excel, it is the pullup. Honestly, I can't think of another exercise that is more important to be good at, because nothing exposes a shitty lifter like the pullup bar. With that in mind, let's start with those who cannot do pullups and/or dips.

## If You Cannot Do a Pullup and/or Dip, Do This

- do 10×3 negatives on pullups and dips three times a week for a month- you'll be able to do both for reps at the end, and then you can start doing this sort of thing.
- do not use bands or machines to help you do pullups or dips- that shit is not a training wheel, but rather a tricycle. You will never be able to do pullups on your own with that weaksauce horseshit, so just do the fucking negatives and be sore and grow.
- Hang from a bar as often as you can, for as long as you can, and hold yourself at full lockout on the dip bars for as long as you can, as often as you can.
- Put a pullup bar in a room you walk through frequently, and begin by doing 1 pullup or hanging from the bar (if you cannot do a pullup) every time you enter and exit the room. Very quickly you'll start adding reps out of boredom and curiosity. You can do the same for dips with two chairs- you just set them up back to back, shoulder width apart, and hold yourself at lockout.

## Option 1: A Day of Pullups/Dips

You can do this sober, drunk, or blazed out of your mind, and any which way you do it, it rules. On a day I'm not planning on hitting the gym I might kick off the morning with 50-100 pullups/dips, then do pullups/dips randomly throughout the day thereafter. This means during commercials, between rounds of Call of Duty, as breaks from writing, or just because I feel like it, I'll crank out a set or two or ten throughout the day. In total I'll do somewhere between 300 and 2000 pullups, and I'll be sore as fuck for days after. I don't track the numbers because I don't give a fuck what the number is- what matters is I did a shitload of pullups, not how many of them I did. I don't need a number for bragging rights, because my back gives me all the bragging rights I need. Also, no one really gives a shit how many pullups/dips anyone can do unless the answer is "very few."

## Option 2: The Burst

Usually this is a max reps in 30 minutes sort of thing. I'll throw on a podcast and lose myself in it as I do sets of 10 reps with a break between to grab a drink of water, shake out my arms, and walk down the hall and back. I think my record for this is 372 on pullups, but I generally don't bother counting. This results in similar soreness to Option 1.

## Option 3: The Goal

Simple- set a daily or weekly goal, and achieve it. There's some challenge going around with a preposterously low number of daily pullups in a year. Like 10 a day. I've no fucking clue what the point of ten pullups or dips a day is, beyond just jerking yourself off for having done

a dumbass challenge. Ten pullups or dips won't do shit. At the very, very minimum, do 200 pullups and 400 dips a week if you want to have a badass upper body at some point.

It doesn't really matter how you do them, so long as you them. Kip em? I don't give a fuck- eventually you'll start doing strict ones just for fun. Shitty ROM? It's better than doing them with the bitch band or the fucking elevator machine. At some point your ROM will lengthen as you grow stronger. But whatever you do, make sure you hang with straight arms every day for at least a minute to ensure you don't go and accidentally shorten your ROM with a bunch of short-range reps, and you do the same on dips.

There is no reason to be alive if you cannot do a few pullups and a bunch of dips.

# The Ancient Greek Method

Although it's a certainty that calisthenics date further back than the Mycenean Civilization (1600-1100BC) to at least the Minoan civilization on Crete (3500-1100BC), the word itself comes from the language of the Myceneans. "Calisthenics" is derived from two ancient Greek words- *Kállos* (to be perfect/good/beautiful) and *sthenos* (a word derived from the name of one of the Gorgons which came to mean moral or emotional strength/power). During that time the Greeks derived, imported, adapted, or invented an entire system of calisthenics that were performed bare ass naked that they called *gymnazo*, which means "to exercise naked." Athenian men over the age of 18 received all manner of physical instruction, the basis of which was calisthenics. This system of calisthenics was essentially a system of bodyweight exercises that combined the goals of hypertrophy, balance, strength, and endurance, and it wasn't so much a sport as it was a training system in a cool-ass community center designed to make people look and feel awesome.

Further down the Greek peninsula we had the Spartans, who had an interesting method of child rearing that involved calisthenics. Beginning at the age of seven, Spartan boys were underfed, underclothed, overworked, beaten, and taught to be harder than learning Finnish. They were regularly forced to fight to death in an über, super fucking brutal version of MMA called pankration, in which fish hooking and eye gouging were encouraged. Though they were gyms, they had no weights to lift- instead the students of the agoge regularly lifted and carried stones and logs for distance as if they were in a tiny, ancient version of World's Strongest Man, and they did a lot of group-oriented calisthenics.

After sending spies to watch the Spartans train, Xerxes discovered that the Spartans exercised in unison with rhythmic movements, which the Persians misinterpreted hilariously interpreted as dancing and judged the Spartans to be weak as a result. That assumption vanished, however, when Xerxes' Ten Thousand were demolished by a force of 300 Spartans, 700 Thespians, and 900 Messenian helot slave-soldier auxiliaries.

Both of those systems were likely adapted from the methods of the two major world powers who preceded them, the Minoans and Egyptians, the two major world powers of the Bronze Age. The Minoans were artists and merchant, and their exercise reflected that- Minoan art shows men and women training with dumbbells and gymnastic movements. The latter seem to have been surrounding the sport of bull-jumping, which seems to have been their favorite sport. The jumping, climbing, balance exercises, and poses of that sport were folded into the training methods of the Greeks along with the sports and training methods of the Egyptians, who seemed to prefer sandbag training, wrestling, and boxing to the gymnastics of the Minoans.

The system as the Greeks originally conceived, consisted of ground work like:

- pushups
- ultra-wide-grip static hold pushups
- handstands
- handstand pushups
- situps
- leg raises

- lunges combined with a sort of Thai push kick with your back leg
- pistol squats
- leaping front kicks
- high knees
- varieties of pullups and muscleups and static holds done on bars and rings (they were called Roman rings in the past, and may date back 2000 years)

Should you be interested in investigating this method, I would do the exercises in a series for a third of your max reps. Alternate upper and lower body exercises to increase the amount of calories burned (an old school method called PHA that Bruce Lee loved). The exercise choice is up to you because we don't have a record of exactly what the Greeks did, and their methods weren't standardized across Mycenae anyway.

# The Indian Method

The third group I mentioned at the outset were the Indians, who actually predated the Greeks and Spartans in terms of having a codified system of exercise. There are extensive historical texts from early antiquity regarding exercise, wrestling, and the sport that was eventually bastardized by hippies in the 1970s called “yoga”. Physical fitness was prized among the Indians, and every village had a gym in which villagers trained and wrestled. The calisthenics regime followed by the Indians is what led to them being the most dominant wrestlers in the world for centuries, and it’s more brutal than anything you’ve tried this side of Arnold’s arm routine.

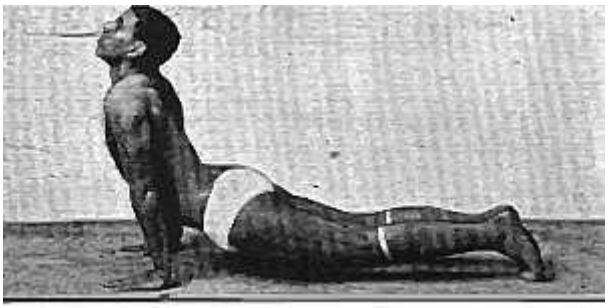
Their methods center around only two exercise- the dand and the baithak, done in incredibly high volumes. The better Indian wrestlers do over 2000 dands (dive bomber pushups) a day, and can do 1500 of them an hour, and the upper body specialists in India do over 5000 a day. In addition to that, they do two to three thousand bethaks (free squats standing on their toes) a day- the fewest a wrestler will do in a day is 500, and top wrestlers like Gama and Raja Randi did 5000 a day in two hours of nonstop squatting.

That might sound insane, but if anything I’m underselling their volume. Per the David Willoughby’s *The Strength Athletes,*

- In the early 20th century, **the professional wrestlers of India could “on the average, perform in their training** five series of 300 dands (body-swaying pushups) and three series of 1000 baithaks (squats) performed on their toes)” (p.258). If you weren’t paying attention, that’s **1500 pushups and 3000 squats a day**. To put that in perspective, that means that there were literally thousands of men in India 100 years ago who could match or exceed Herschell Walker in his legendary workouts, in spite of the fact that they were vegetarians. And they were just the average wrestlers.
- **East Indians took this training a step further and added jump squats performed like baithaks, only they jumped as high as possible at the top of every reps**. They could do up to 700 of those in a a row, which is a volume of work that would kill Crossfitters who consider a giant bowl of rhabdomyolysis part of a balanced breakfast.
- The Great Gama, legendary professional wrestler of the early 20th Century, was still doing **200 dands and 400 baithaks followed by a four mile walk/run and three hours of wrestling a day… at age 69. Your age is not an excuse**.

- **Raja Randi**, an Indian wrestler who was the ultimate ladies man in the wrestling scene of 1930's Germany, **was famous for doing 5000 squats every day in two hours**. When challenged that it was impossible, he invited a bunch of doctors to observe. After they'd counted out 5000 in under an hour, he did an additional 300 combination dand-baithaks. When he was done, the doctors found he'd barely even raised his heart rate. THAT is conditioning.
- Hamida Banu, daughter of a famous Indian wrestler named Nadir, trained so goddamned hard that she was practically unbeatable. When she wasn't squatting she was wrestling, and she fought 300 professional wrestling matches after turning 19 that were predominantly against men- she only wrestled women three times. Endless squatting gave her a massive base, and she was built like a brick shithouse at 5'3″ 215lbs. **She remained unmarried long past what was considered proper due to the fact that she'd only marry a guy who could beat her in a match, and hardly anyone could, due in large part to crazy high-rep squats**.
- **Mr. Universe Monohar Aich** spent a couple of years in British prison for dragging the Crown, and he **built ridiculous 600+lb squat at a ridiculously low bodyweight in lockup by doing 100 rep sets of one-legged squats, pushups, crunches, pullups, and leg raises for 8-12 hours a day**… while recuperating from the bubonic plague.

Beyond that, Indian wrestlers do tons of somersaults to build flexibility and core strength, wrestler's bridges for their necks, and headstands. And though they're now considered weightlifting implements, another feature of their training that could be replicated without spending a single dime was club swinging, which could be replicated simply by swinging a heavy tree branch, log, or a piece of lumber. Again, they had no program for training- they'd just bust their asses as hard as they thought they needed to, and then would do a couple hundred more reps just to be safe.



This is the bottom position of a dand, and you just reverse the motion to get back to the start.

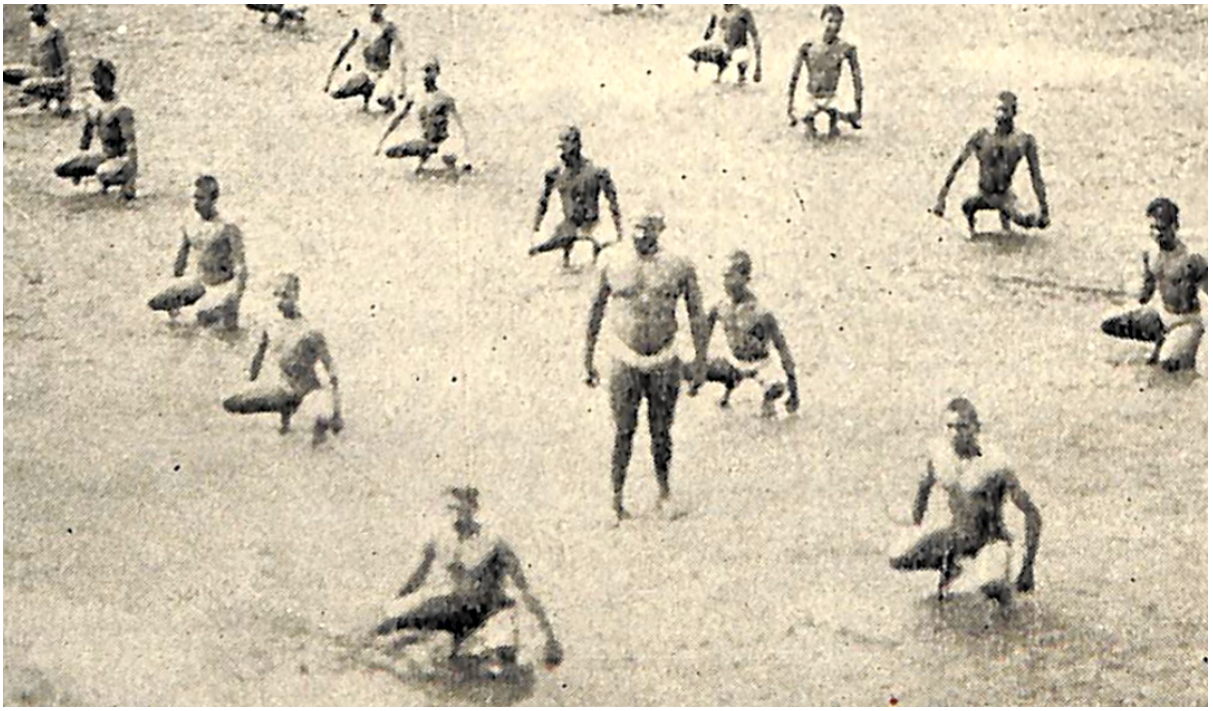
## The Dand

For those amongst you who've wrestled, you'll recognize the dand as a sort of dive-bomber pushup, or as the thing you had to do in practice when your coach wanted to punish you horribly for something.

For those of you who've never done one of these, we'll refer to Joseph Alter's description in *The Wrestler's Body* for proper performance for step by step directions, or you can click here to see it done.

> “One starts a dand from a face-down, prone position with feet placed close together and palms flat on the ground directly below the shoulders about half a meter apart. To begin, one cocks the body back by lifting one’s buttocks into the air while straightening both arms and legs (see figure 2). Bending at the elbows, one dives forward so that the chest glides between the palms close to the ground. One then arches up while straightening the arms and thrusting the pelvis down towards the ground. One then recocks the body to the starting position.”

These should be done daily, in ridiculous volume, and should be performed non-stop. Once you’ve assumed the starting position, you should continue them until you’re finished. Good wrestlers do over 2000 a day, and can do 1500 of them an hour, and the upper body specialists in India do over 5000 a day. That, my friends, is fucking craziness.



## The Baithak

Baithaks are what we all know as free squats done on your toes, with a little bit of a hop. They’re pretty easy to do, until you start to get into the type of volume for which the Indians are famous- we’re talking two to three thousand bethaks a day. The fewest a pehlwan (wrestler) will do in a day is 500, which should tell you these guys are fucking serious about getting strong fucking legs.

If you’re interested in doing these correctly, you rock them like this according to Joseph Alter’s *The Wrestler’s Body*:

> “One starts a bethak from a standing position with feet set at forty-five degree angles and heels about fifteen to twenty centimeters apart. While squatting down one should jump slightly forward onto the balls of one’s feet while lifting the heels clear off the floor. In the process of standing back up, one should jump backwards to the position

> from which one started. One's arms should be relaxed. They should sway with the movement of the body in order to maintain balance. One's eyes should be fixed on a point about four meters forward on the ground, so that one's head will be stationary and balanced."

But don't forget that rhythm is a big part of doing this high rep stuff- "The most important feature of dands and bethaks is that they be done rhythmically and at a steady pace. The performance of thousands of these exercises produces a mental state not unlike that of a person who has gone into a trance through the rote recitation of a mantra or prayer. Thus, dands and bethaks transport the wrestler into an altered state of consciousness from which he derives psychic and spiritual purification. Vyayam is very much like meditation in this respect."

As you're almost undoubtedly new to this, go easy in your first efforts. I recommend sets of 20 of each as you get the form down, as the form of each exercise is considerably different than what you're used to. The jumping baithaks are especially fun, though I have no goddamned idea how anyone ever did 700 of them in a row. Remember, you have to crawl before you walk.

# Playing Cards

You really don't need a program for calisthenics- the goal is to just get strong and work on body control. Thus, a heavy dose of dips, pullups, planks, arm circles, and squats are encouraged at the start. Then, you basically just play- try shit and see if you can do it. Then, get stronger and try again. For those of you looking for linear periodization, you won't find it here… because linear periodization sucks, and we're not fucking robots.

Clearly, none of the above is mind-melting or ground breaking, but people rarely think of it in terms of strength building. I can personally attest, however, to the fact that I am far stronger when I include a couple of 20 minute sessions of bodyweight work every week. In fact, when I was in college, a buddy and I used to "play cards" a couple of times a week, and that kept us ripped in spite of the fact we were facing a couple of Blizzards from Dairy Queen every day.

When we played cards we'd watch either Rocky 3 or Rocky 4 and place a deck of cards between us. We'd take turns drawing cards, and would do either pushups (black) or abs (red). Black diamonds were diamond pushups, and red diamonds were double the situps.

We'd go through the deck a couple of times, and kept me as ripped as a phone book at a strongman competition and ready as an evangelical Christian dude on his wedding night. In other words, "playing cards" was an awesome addition to my 5-6 days a week of training.

In my adult life, I mostly do dips, pullups, and arm circles rather than pushups and situps. If I can find a tall stack of mats, I might do high jumps in between supersets of pullups and dips, or maybe ab wheel.

# There is a Benefit to Laying Off the Heavy Training for a While to Focus on Getting Healthy

This is an article I wrote during the Covid lockdown about my training during that shitfest. I've included it because I figured there are those of you who think that a switch to bodyweight exercises for a couple of months would have deleterious effects- it won't. In fact, I've since done it at least once in an effort to unfuck my body from decades of forcing it to support massive loads in weird positions.

After 10 weeks of federally-enforced gym hiatus, I entered the gym again yesterday. The gym was small and packed, so I decided to use the implements that were free rather than those I'd planned to use in advance (there was a line for the squat rack).

I pulled a ton of singles on the Pit-Shark with a fat bar, which was essentially a fat bar deadlift. I've no idea how that weight relates to actual bar weight, but as I haven't deadlifted once since 2014, I had no great expectations. I ended up pulling a lot of singles with somewhere in excess of 900 pounds of plate weights, which was a nice ego boost, if nothing else. Thereafter, I slowly worked up to 365 on flat bench singles for a few, then repped out with 315 and 225 for a couple of sets each. With 45 mins of each exercise under my belt, I left- easy peasy.

I'm hardly suggesting I set the world on fire with the weights I moved, but I haven't flat benched since last fall (I abandoned it for a 405 incline that barely escaped my clutches due to shoulder knotting) and haven't touched a barbell in nigh on seven weeks, so I would say that was a stellar day at the gym.

And the way I did it?

**Free Squats**– done randomly in sets of 30-50 for a total of 300-500, then during whatever breaks I have in video games that evening. If I die in COD WW2, I do five to ten squats before I respawn- that sort of thing. I did them roughly every other day after waiting a couple of weeks for the gym to reopen.

**Dips**– 500-1000 every other day in sets of 25-50. I built a dipping station in the backyard for that reason using scrap lumber and some tent post anchors. At least, that's what they looked like- I'm not a handy man by any stretch of the imagination.

**Pullups**– 100-500 every day or so. Mostly neutral (pals-facing) grip, but occasionally three finger overhand pullups with a close grip. The doorframe in which my pullup bar is set doesn't allow for wide grip pullups.

**TRX rows and chest flies**– super high rep on the rows, less so on the flies, done whenever I felt like it.

**Band Overhead Press**– I did a fuckload of them every couple of days.

**Band Curls**– did these pretty much daily, throughout the day. My arms reflect that- they're filling out my 2XL sleeves now.

And there you have it- training at home using almost nothing but bodyweight exercises will maintain an appreciable amount of your strength, if not all of it. As to size, my wife insisted that I actually got bigger in that period, though that might just be due to the fact that we ate pizza three times a week for two months, haha. That said, I didn't gain much, if any, fat.

## How to Determine the Number of Reps Per Set

With 30 as my general "max," I do sets of ten. I've tried every other number from 8-20, and ten to twelve is the most comfortable and repeatable. I don't want to struggle doing these- this is honestly more like jogging than it is like lifting. From there, the world is your oyster as far as setting up how you want to train, but I always do my pullups at home so I can spread them out over time if I want.

I'm not telling you that ten is your magic number. I'd say somewhere between a quarter and a half of your max is ideal, depending on your personal muscular strength/endurance balance. And your AMRAP will improve over time due to the volume you do, regardless of the rep number you choose.

If you're curious, this methodology arose out of hanging out during the summers with my training partner. We worked at the same place, so afterwards we'd lift and run, and if we were playing video games or whatever in the evening we'd randomly throw in pullups and pushups because we liked to compete at everything, all the fucking time. It didn't matter if we were playing Tiddlywinks or benching 225 for reps- he and I competed at literally everything. So, when we weren't seeing how obnoxious we could be while flashing our abs like douches to pick up chicks, we were finding ways to test our relative physical prowess against one another.

We'd both run the 100, 200, and 4×100 in track, so we were used to using interval training to build up our endurance and muscular endurance. That translated into our strength training, as we started using a lot of what amounted to rest pauses, though it was really just born out of a desire to make the other guy look like a pussy for resting too long. Eventually, we settled into a rhythm in which we'd do an easily repeatable set of something, rest a short while, and go again, endlessly.

In high school, we'd called this "fart licks" and held endless debates about which famous chick's ass most needed eating, the name of the methodology we'd been is called Fartleks, and it's unlike the HIIT and Tabata bullshit to which you're accostomed- in spite of what you might see from the 20 year olds on Youtube, four minutes is not getting it done when it come to vertical rowing. Fartlek means "speed play" in Swedish, and involves alternating bouts of sprinting with jogging to quickly increase your endurance. Not only does this work fucking wonders for your mile time (spend a month sprinting the straights and doing the "airborn shuffle" on the curves of your local high school track, a mile at a go, and do at least five miles a week like that, and you will see your mile time get seriously respectable without having killed yourself to do it), but it works amazingly for pullups as well.

The terms “jog” and “sprint” are completely ambiguous terms, so this method is so scalable it’s fucking ridiculous- it doesn’t matter what your ability is, because you will always have a “sprint” and a “jog” pace with whatever you do.

Our coach used a methodology like the one in this image for the sprinters. Middle distance (400m-800m) had their own intervals, and then the milers had their own.

I realize that the above varies the ranges on the work and rest, but the gist of it is that the effort is submaximal, repeatable, and characterized by rest periods that basically match the effort periods. I’m not too wedded to timers, however, and follow the sprint the straights/slow jog the curves methodology more closely here. The point, however, is not to ape my methods exactly but to find your own way- this just gives you a starting place.

# GO FORTH AND BE AWESOME.

AND DON'T FORGET: "CALISTHENICS" IS DERIVED FROM TWO ANCIENT GREEK WORDS- KÁLLOS (TO BE PERFECT/GOOD/BEAUTIFUL) AND STHENOS (A WORD DERIVED FROM THE NAME OF ONE OF THE GORGONS WHICH CAME TO MEAN MORAL OR EMOTIONAL STRENGTH/POWER).
STHENO WAS THE MOST MURDEROUS OF THE GORGONS, AND SHE HAD A HEAD FULL OF RED SNAKES, BRONZE HANDS, AND A HEART FULL OF HATE FOR WEAKNESS. YOU DON'T NEED TO GET HATEFUL TO KICK ASS AT CALISTHENICS, BUT IT NEVER HURTS TO REMEMBER HOW INTENSE THE GREEKS THOUGHT CALISTHENICS SHOULD BE.
SHOULD YOU WANT TO CHANNEL THAT KIND OF RAGE, HOWEVER, FOCUS ON THOSE WHO'VE DONE YOU WRONG- STHENOS WAS CURSED TO BE A GORGON BECAUSE SHE WAS PISSED THAT HER YOUNGER SISTER MEDUSA WAS TURNED INTO ONE FOR THE CRIME OF BEING RAPED.
FUCKED UP, RIGHT?